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## CURIOUS CUP IN NIELLO, PRESERVED IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

THE remarkable cup, of which we give an engraving, is traced to the fifteenth century. Its substance is silver; the base, the upper border of this cup, the lower border of the lid, the flower, and the statuette which surmounts it, are gilded. Its total height is about three feet. The figures with which it is adorned, appear to be entirely fanciful. For a long time it was the property of the noble family of Van Bekerhout, who made a present of it to the sculptor Calonia, who executed the statue of John Von Eyck which is in the Academy of Arts at Bruges. The widow of this artist sold it to a gentleman, Mr. Henry Farrer, who afterwards disposed of it to the British Museum for the sum of £350.

The manner of its execution is worthy of particular notice. In the fifteenth century, and even long before, it was the practice to decorate the church and other plate with works in *niello*, which were designs hatched with a steel point in gold or silver, then engraved with the burin, and run in while hot, with a composition called *niello*—an Italian term, derived from the Latin *nigallam*, from the compound of silver, lead, copper, sulphur, and borax, which was easily fusible being of a black colour. The superfluous part of this niello which remained above the surface of the plate was then rubbed off with scrapers, and cleaned away with pumice-stone, leaving the engraved design on the plate, with all the effect of print.

Remarkable as this process was, there arose out of it another incalculably more so. It became a practice for artists, who wished to preserve their designs, to take impressions of their plates with earth, over which liquid sulphur was poured, and from which, when cold, the earth was removed. But Maso Finiguerra, a goldsmith and sculptor of Florence, and a pupil of the celebrated Masaccio, about the middle of the fifteenth century, carried the process still further, for with a mixture of soot and oil he filled the cavities of the engraving he had made, as a preparation for niello, and by pressing damp paper upon it with a roller, obtained impressions on the pa-

per, having as Vasarie says, "Veni vano come designate di penna"—all the appearance of drawings done with a pen. Finiguerra

was followed by Baccio Balderri, a goldsmith of Florence, who, according to Vasari, employed the eminent artist Sandro Botticelli, to design for him.

The arts are generally to be traced to a humble origin, and in these works in niello often discovering little taste, we recognise the cradle of that of engraving on *copper*, to which engraving on *steel* has within the last few years succeeded. In the earliest efforts of this kind, the lines produced were comparatively rude and unmeaning, and had nothing more to recommend them than their merely representing a particular sort of markings, or slight hatchings with a pen, without any apparent degree of execution or expression. It was not long, however, before this incipient art became

indebted to the elegant etchings of the great masters in painting, as well as to their drawings in pen and ink. It acquired accuracy and taste from the drawings of Raffaele, Michael Angelo, and Leonardo da Vinci, which connoisseurs of our own time have seen and admired. Some of those by Da Vinci were hatched in a square and delicate manner, with a white fluid on dark-coloured paper; while those of Michael Angelo and Raffaele inclined more to the lozenge, in black or brown ink. They even carried this style of hatching with the pencil into their pictures, some of which adorn the Vatican, and into the famous cartoons, which are the glory of our own picture gallery at Hampton Court; and by the persevering application of the graver, the art has been advancing to the present period.

When compared with painting, it appears but of recent invention. being coeval only with the art of printing.

It is for us to rejoice in the immense power that it now possesses, and to avoid the error pointed out by Lord Bacon when he said: "We are too prone to pass those ladders by which the arts are reared, and generally to reflect all the merit to the last new performer."

